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## Schooling in conflict: an ethnographic study from Lebanon

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### Abstract

*Purpose* – The purpose of this paper is to propose a new approach to understanding the interrelationships between education and violent conflict, namely, one that focuses on the multifaceted, context-specific impact of conflict on school communities and departs from the lived experiences of teachers and students in conflict-affected places.

*Design/methodology/approach* – The paper is based on ethnographic, child-centred research in elementary schools in Lebanon. It explores how the 2006 war between Hezbollah and Israel and subsequent internal sectarian strife in Lebanon have shaped the ways in which school communities confront issues of violence and identity.

*Findings* – By viewing the relationship between education and violent conflict as multifaceted and context-dependent, this paper elicits how schools may become complicit in the continuing of violent conflict, rather than supporting its ending. It shows how teachers' pleas for peace are overruled by political conflict, partly as a result of children's engagement with politics. The paper argues for grounding educational interventions in children's lived realities so as to optimise their capacities for bridging differences and shaping a better future.

*Originality/value* – The lived experiences of students and teachers in conflict zones have rarely been exposed. On the basis of anthropological research, this paper offers original and critical insights into the interrelationships between education and violent conflict, based on the perspectives of elementary school students and their educators.

*Keywords* Education, Conflict, Identity, Children, Lebanon, Anthropology

*Paper type* Research paper

"When we went back to school after the war, all windows were broken. Everyone was afraid [. . .] But the teachers said nothing about it [. . .]" says nine year-old Imad. "Why didn't your teachers talk about it?" I ask him. "Because then the students would remember [. . .]"

(Elementary School, Beirut, Lebanon, January 2007).

Recorded five months after the end of the summer 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah, this excerpt serves as a good starting point to illustrate three key elements that have been neglected in academic accounts of the consequences of armed conflict on school populations. First, academics have barely explored the multifaceted consequences of armed conflicts on educational institutions, including their social, cultural, political, and physical environments. Second, scholars have largely disregarded the ways in which educators engage with conflict-related topics in relation to their students. Third, almost entirely absent in the literature are children's perspectives on, and experiences of, schooling in conflict-affected settings. Enhancing our understanding of these daily realities and lived experiences of schooling in conflict-affected places is a prerequisite for improving educational interventions aimed at conflict transformation and peace building. Based on ethnographic research in elementary schools in Lebanon, the present article examines the interrelationships between schooling and violent conflict. It focuses on multiple processes at work within

school communities and includes a specific interest in students' perspectives. Accordingly, a new approach in academic work and development practice is proposed: one that centres on the lived experiences of teaching and learning in societies divided by violent conflict.

### **Education and violent conflict**

Today's armed conflicts increasingly involve non-state actors, as well as "non-conventional" weaponry and strategies of warfare. Civilians and civil infrastructure have become direct and indirect targets of warring parties, often involving acts of symbolic violence aimed at harming the core identities of civil populations and directing their political loyalties (Boyden and de Berry, 2004; Hick, 2001). The UNESCO (2007) report "Education Under Attack" highlights the increasing military and political targeting of educational institutions, their students and personnel. The report describes how attacks on schools may be ideologically, religiously, politically, or militarily informed, while causing the death, injury, abduction, and flight of students and educational workers, destruction of buildings and materials, as well as psychological trauma, fear, and stress. The report underlines, however, that no accurate data exist on the amount and scale of attacks on schools, nor on their actual impact (UNESCO, 2007).

While attacks on educational institutions seem to be on the rise, schooling has nonetheless become intimately linked with discourse on peacebuilding and conflict resolution. Education has been assigned a place among the most essential conditions for human development and well-being, alongside food, shelter, and medical care. Particularly in conflict-affected places, it is argued, provision of schooling is a critical instrument in facilitating processes of reconstruction, rehabilitation, and reconciliation[1]. Yet, as well as highlighting the merits of education, the UNESCO report also expresses concerns regarding the uncritical lauding of education "as the solution, the key to harmony, the key to building social justice, peace and hope for the future" (Deputy General Secretary of Education International quoted in UNESCO (2007, p. 41):

It is not simply about having a peace curriculum, for example, but about the way the school is run, the whole ethos of the organization. Pupils must come to believe that the school stands for certain values and take those on board. It is about the way the school conducts itself, the way rules are transparent and fairly applied, the way difference is recognized and valued (UNESCO, 2007, p. 40).

In other words, relief and development policy should not only focus on providing children in war-affected areas with mere access to education, but also, and more importantly, on what children learn and how they learn. Underlining this point, the report neatly reflects a shifting approach that occurred over the past two decades, namely, from a quest towards universal primary education towards a drive to provide "quality education for all" (See [www.unicef.org/education/](http://www.unicef.org/education/)).

With the reinforcement of inequalities and discrimination as significant examples of the potentially disparaging consequences of schooling in conflict-affected societies, reports have increasingly acknowledged that education can be as much part of the solution as the cause of violent strife (Bush and Saltarelli, 2000; Davies, 2004; Seitz, 2004; Sommers, 2002). Perceptiveness to the tentative interrelationship between education and violent conflict, however, has not yet rendered practical guidelines

as to how educational programmes should be designed and implemented to enhance schools' constructive potentials. On the contrary, it is predominantly a lack of knowledge in this regard that continues to complicate policy-making and programme implementation. It is no wonder that research reports (see above) and policy makers have repeatedly voiced the "urgent need" (Seitz, 2004, p. 8) for advanced research that clarifies this complex dynamic.

The urge for better understanding of the interrelationships between education and violent conflict is not limited to the realm of international development, but simultaneously pertains to the world of academia. Most scholarly studies, however, adopt either an educationalist approach that focuses on education systems and disregards children's own perspectives, or a child protection stance that generally fails to relate children's experiences to the context of schooling (Winthrop and Kirk, 2008, p. 640). Literature that explores both the local dynamics of schooling in conflict-affected contexts and simultaneously probes children's and teachers' perspectives and experiences, remains scarce (Bekerman et al., 2009; Spyrou, 2002; this issue). It is imperative, though, to confront these lived experiences in order to arrive at a more profound understanding of the interplay between the impact of violence on school communities on the one hand, and the effects of education on the dynamics of violent conflict on the other (Leonard, 2007).

As noted above, today's conflicts often involve attempts to gain or steer the loyalty and support of ordinary citizens. When, for example, religious buildings or hospitals are attacked or cemeteries desecrated, these acts of violence pertain to people's core identifications and beliefs. Hence, it is important to examine the ways in which questions of identity and belonging are addressed by educational programmes in conflict-affected places (Bekerman, 2009); while bearing in mind that schools by nature represent politicised institutions that serve to direct children's loyalties towards particular abstract identifications, authorities, norms, and values (Eriksen, 2002). Stimulating insights into the ways in which school populations may deal with the main quandaries that stem from contemporary armed conflict are offered by Bekerman's work on bilingual, multicultural education in Palestinian-Jewish schools in Israel. Showing how notions of nationality, religion, and culture become essentialised inside multicultural schools, contrary to the aims of encouraging mutual respect and understanding, Bekerman (2004, p. 575) warns that "uncritical applications of multiculturalism risk aggravating the interethnic tension that they hoped to alleviate". Demonstrating how deliberate educational attempts at fostering mutual respect and positive coexistence may fail to reach their ends, the author presents yet another call for caution in the design of educational programmes aimed at promoting peace.

Both Dicum (2008) and Winthrop and Kirk (2008) point out the problem of the neglect of learners' perspectives in studies dealing with education in conflict situations. Dicum examines the experiences of learning through a comparative analysis of oral histories from Second World War and the post-1979 conflict in Afghanistan. Similarly to Bekerman, she argues that actual learning outcomes during times of conflict may be at odds with the intentions of curricula and educational interventions (Dicum, 2008). Based on data collected among refugee students from Eritrea, Afghanistan, and Liberia, Winthrop and Kirk (2008, p. 639) challenge the prevailing view that schooling almost inevitably stimulates children's well-being in conflict-affected places, since this argument "is often made without reference to children's lived experiences of education

during and after armed conflict". Hence, the authors centre on children's academic and social learning experiences and how these are a fundamental, though often neglected, part of the way in which schooling may (or may not) have a positive impact on their general well-being when quality and relevance of students' learning are prioritized (Winthrop and Kirk, 2008, pp. 657-8).

As a starting point for the analysis that follows, I take Bekerman's critical outlook on how conflict is perceived and (re)produced in primary schools, as well as Dicum, Winthrop and Kirk's approach that centres on children's perspectives and experiences. Accordingly, I seek to join a relatively recent trend in the anthropology of education to focus on non-Western communities (Yon, 2003), paying special attention to hidden curricula, conflicting cultural claims, power relations, and the wider community that the school is part of (Schiffauer et al., 2004). Simultaneously, this article is grounded in the rising field of child-centred studies within the social sciences that rejects viewing children as mere appendices to adult society and instead approaches them as agents' (who make a crucial contribution) to the reproduction and sustenance of cultural forms (Hirschfeld, 1999, p. 12; cf. Evers et al., 2011; James, 2007) of which both schooling and conflict are prominent examples.

### **Conflict in Lebanon**

Since gaining independence in 1943, the Middle-Eastern Republic of Lebanon (current population four million) has known a political and administrative system based on sectarian power-sharing among its 18 recognised religious currents, of which the most significant are Maronite Christian, Sunni Muslim, and Shi'a Muslim. From 1975 until 1990, a civil war raged through the country, leaving approximately 150,000 people dead, 100,000 injured for life, 17,000 missing, and nearly one million abroad. The conflict was ended by a peace agreement that failed to defuse what many consider as one of its leading causes, namely, the problematic link between political power and sectarian affiliation. Following the war, Lebanon remained under partial control of neighbouring Israel and Syria. Pressured, amongst others, by assaults from the side of Hezbollah – a Shi'a socio-political-military movement founded in the early 1980s – Israel withdrew its forces from South Lebanon in 2000. The outcry that ensued from the 2005 assassination of former Prime Minister Hariri, in turn, forced Syria to pull out its army, amidst a period marked by multiple assassinations of political figures and violent struggles for political power that repeatedly brought the country to the verge of a new civil war. Currently, the country is split between a "pro-Western" coalition dominated by Sunni and Christian parties (led by the son of slain PM Hariri) on the one hand, and a "pro-Syrian" alliance, consisting of mainly Shi'a and Christian parties and led by Hezbollah, on the other.

On top of this intractable internal friction and instability, Lebanon witnessed a 34-day war between Hezbollah's militiamen and the Israel Defence Forces during the summer of 2006, a conflict that mirrored many of the above-mentioned characteristics of contemporary armed conflicts. Aerial bombardments by Israeli fighter jets killed around 1,400 Lebanese, 1,100 of whom were civilians. Meanwhile, Hezbollah fighters killed some 110 Israeli troops, while its rocket attacks on Northern Israel left 43 Israeli civilians dead. On the Lebanese side, vital infrastructure and Hezbollah strongholds, such as Beirut's southern suburbs and Shi'a villages in South Lebanon, were destroyed or severely damaged. Until today, Lebanon and Israel remain in an official state of war,

with tensions unrelentingly high. Reminders of the looming prospect of renewed violence are Hezbollah's stockpiling of weapons, frequent manoeuvres by Israeli fighter jets over Lebanon, a deadly border clash in the summer of 2010, and repeated belligerent speeches by leaders from both countries.

The effects imposed by this multi-layered, unrelenting state of insecurity and violence on Lebanese school communities will be examined after a brief overview of Lebanon's educational system.

### **Education in Lebanon**

Even though Lebanese political reality at times diverts attention away from ideals of peace and unity, these notions are far from alien to the founding documents of the Lebanese state, among which is the national curriculum. Following the end of the civil war in 1990, a Plan for Educational Reform was drafted that sought to strengthen national cohesion among students and to spread "authentic Lebanese values, such as liberty, democracy, tolerance and rejection of violence" (Frayha, 2003). The new curriculum, which went into effect in 1998, also stressed values such as respect, active coexistence, and acceptance of others.

A key element in any national curriculum, and particularly in those aimed at nation-building and promoting peace, is the part on national identity and history. From the collapse of the Ottoman Empire during the First World War until today, disputes on Lebanon's Arab or sovereign identity have divided society and educational policy-makers alike (Salibi, 1988). While the peace agreement that ended the civil war managed to accommodate both sentiments by defining Lebanon as an Arab state with a distinct Lebanese character (Frayha, 2003), the drafting of a national history curriculum proved much more complicated – not surprisingly, considering the intensity of suffering and animosity the country had witnessed. A committee was entrusted with the responsibility of writing a national history curriculum that could make the civil war into a story not only shared, but also overcome by all Lebanese, irrespective of one's sectarian background. Facing countless interpretations of events, causes and consequences of the conflict, the committee eventually failed to deliver a history curriculum that was accepted by all parties involved. As a result, today, history is taught in schools on the basis of the 1971 pre-civil war curriculum that, evidently, lacks any reference to events that are key to understanding present-day Lebanon.

### **Data collection**

The present paper is based on ethnographic field research conducted in 2007 (three months), 2010 (three months), and is still ongoing in 2011 (six months) as part of a doctoral study that explores the interrelationship between education and violent conflict, thereby specifically focusing on children's engagement with identity and violence. The findings are based on extensive participant observation in classrooms, playgrounds, and teachers' rooms, as well as on interviews with educators and students, focus group discussions, draw-and-tell exercises, among other activities. Months-long periods of participant-observation have been carried out in one private elementary school in Beirut and one in South Lebanon (around 65 per cent of Lebanese children attend private education). Schools near the Israeli border have been visited on one off day visits. The research focuses on children aged seven to 12 years, although it includes stories of children ranging from five to 15. For the sake of brevity and clarity,

the current article focuses on the findings of research conducted in the first three months of 2007 in a multi-sectarian private school in Beirut. The overall argument, though, also rests on the analysis of findings in the other schools.

In view of the potentially painful or even traumatic topics addressed by this study, my first concern has always been with my respondents' well-being: participation in research was voluntary and questions could be left unanswered and topics untouched at any time. During research visits to the most severely hit areas, I was accompanied by a local child-psychologist with extensive knowledge of, and professional experience in the area. For the most part, I have been deeply impressed by the eagerness of children and adults to share their most personal stories about their pasts, the 2006 war, their present worries, and hopes for the future.

### **Confronting conflict in school**

When I asked a ten year-old boy about his memories of the previous summer, thus avoiding mentioning "war", he rejoiced and said "It was fun! We stayed at my uncle's house in the mountains for two months. We were swimming and playing all day!" After a brief pause, however, he added dejectedly:

It was also very scary. I remember the first bomb that was dropped on the airport at 6.30h. The first day I was very afraid. On the second day I played at my Playstation to forget about the war. We could hear the bombs and the airplanes at night when they bombed Dahiyeh. One time they dropped twenty bombs in only two minutes. From our balcony we could see the destruction.

Likewise, most students of an elementary school situated on the border of Dahiyeh, a Shi'a suburb of Beirut where Hezbollah has its main offices, recalled how they fled soon after the Israeli bombardments started. Families sought refuge in safe areas, such as the mountains or suburbs of the capital with a predominantly Sunni Muslim or Christian population, as they knew that these would be spared:

I was very scared during the war. It was my first war. My mum was afraid, she told me it was very dangerous. But my mum said I shouldn't be scared. She said it is far from here. We are safe in the mountains (Girl, six years).

When I asked what the war was about and who were involved, one student explained that:

It started because Hezbollah kidnapped two or three people. One of them died. Therefore, Israel destroyed all Hezbollah buildings. But Hezbollah was not destroyed. They even won the war! (Boy, ten years).

Next to talking about fleeing their homes, experiencing the fear and impact of bombings, explaining the conditions under which the war had evolved, and extensively describing its damage, most children referred to how their parents had responded to events. Observations like "my mother and sister were shivering. My dad wasn't afraid, because he knew how it is" (Boy, ten years) were, when narrated by boys, often accompanied by detailed accounts of their fathers' heroic civil war stories. Accordingly, a gender-specific tendency in the perception of warfare was brought to light: although both boys and girls implicitly agreed that war is something that inevitably recurs, as indicated by repeated references like "this was the first war of my life," to the boys it seemed a key ritual that had initiated them into Lebanese manhood. This sentiment was further substantiated



when they met each other again at school, six weeks after the war had ended. Sharing experiences of the summer, boys and girls became aware that now, they also had experienced war, just like their parents and heroes. "War" became grounded in their discourse and perceptions of life and what it means to be Lebanese.

"When we went back to school after the war, all windows were broken. Everyone was afraid [. . .] But the teachers said nothing about it [. . .]" said a nine-year-old boy. "Why didn't your teachers talk about it?" I asked. "Because then the students would remember [. . .] I was not afraid, but everyone was sad". One of his classmates remembered that "the teachers did not say anything about the war. Only the students told what had happened to them". Teachers remembered students being nervous, stressed, and unable to concentrate. "Especially when they would hear fireworks or airplanes, they would be frightened". Still, they were glad to be back at school, because they could finally catch up with their friends and support each other.

For teachers, too, returning to school implied regaining a sense of normalcy. School served as a space where stories, thoughts, and emotions could be shared, mutual support could be provided, and, importantly, as a source of income and security. At the same time, however, teachers faced students that had just lived through war, and did not know how to handle them. Often, they resorted to neglecting the topic of war and violence all together, and complained about students being obsessed with sectarianism and politics.

In the wake of the war, sectarian tensions quickly mounted in Lebanon. People started questioning Hezbollah's actions that had wreaked such havoc, and through this debate the political rift reappeared that had paralysed the country since the killing of Hariri in 2005. "Immediately after the war, internal conflicts started again, and an extremely unstable situation has developed since", the school principal noted. With a multi-sectarian school composition, these political tensions inevitably found their way into the school's premises:

Children are stressed. They talk a lot. Everybody talks. In grades two and three [age six to eight], students are aware of the differences between several groups. In grade four we had some problems. But the higher grades actually become divided along sectarian lines (Principal).

A ten-year-old girl noted that:

Outside school, children who were friends before are now enemies, because there are two presidents: Hariri and Nasrallah [Hezbollah's chief]. My best friend is with Nasrallah and I am Hariri but we don't care. Some mothers tell their children "you should not talk to them because they are with Nasrallah or Hariri". But my parents say "you should not talk about whom you are with".

In order to defuse tensions and prevent clashes from occurring inside the school, the administration formulated a strict decree:

We don't talk about politics, and we don't talk about religion. The school is independent. Here, education is important, not politics. We try to foster a mini Lebanon in which everyone loves each other (Principal).

Both students and the principal knew about schools where clashes had occurred. Hence, the silencing of "politics" was widely appreciated:

Inside school, it is not allowed to talk about politics. That is good, because it is better if we don't know who is with whom. Then there will be no fights in school (Girl, ten years).

“Politics” is a recurring issue in any realm of Lebanese society and pertains to every aspect of life. Where do you live? Where does your family come from? What is your religion? Where do you go to school or work? Which media do you follow? Which leader do you admire? Whom do you turn to in times of need? These queries, among others, are covered by one overarching question: who are you with? One teacher described politics as “deeply rooted issues in which there is no right or wrong. Which is why discussions make no sense, since there can be no solution”. As these questions permeate society and divide it into the earlier mentioned, seemingly irreconcilable blocs, the question is, to what extent schools can counter this process, guarantee peaceful interaction, and foster a sense of national unity and coexistence. A prime obstacle to this effort is erected by the government itself, as the school principal explained:

We cannot turn to the government for help, for if we would do that, we would automatically align ourselves with them and against Hezbollah and the opposition. We want to stay away from those things. The government doesn’t even manage to produce a history book that is accepted throughout the country, it’s a shame!

Despite the school’s “no politics and no religion” decree, students were well informed and eloquent in the way they discussed sectarian parties, their leaders, and political allegiances. They based their views on adults’ conversations and television broadcasts, but also, and for a great deal, on discussions with peers. I was told by a teacher that:

[. . .] they know about each other whether they are aligned with Hezbollah or with the government. They know their symbols, their standpoints. They talk about it outside the class and enquire “with whom is he or she?”

Other examples of how politics entered classrooms were pictures of leaders hidden in students’ files and an incident in which students were asked to bring magazines for a project. As one teacher pointed out, “some parents gave them political magazines, from which they distributed images along religious lines. Thus, division became highly visible within the classroom”.

As with the pictures of political leaders, each political party adopts several symbols that represent its sect and standpoints. Part of these symbols are colour codes that are used throughout the Lebanese public sphere. A teacher expounded:

The students ask me, Miss, why don’t you use yellow chalk? Or why do you wear orange? You must know that every colour has a specific meaning. Orange is Aoun [a Christian leader allied with Hezbollah], green and yellow are Shi’a and Hezbollah, blue is Sunni, and red is Christian or March 14 [the pro-Western bloc].

As we have seen, two conflicting levels of communication arose inside the school: on the one hand, the “official” narrative of suppressing political strife and emphasising national unity, and, on the other hand, an obsession with sectarian belonging and “politics” as expressed through a wide range of discursive and non-discursive channels. The level of silence was mainly directed and enforced by adults, while children played a major role in voicing and manifesting sectarianism and political divisions:

Every now and then a student comes to me to ask “Am I Sunni or Shi’a?” or “What is my sect?” Then I reply “You don’t have to know. You are Lebanese” or “You have to love each other as human beings, not as members of a particular sect” (Teacher).

As such, both students and teachers were aware of the existence of the two conflicting, and often confounding, narratives. Both effectively subscribed to the need to keep the peace within the school. Yet, at the same time, they acknowledged that the social reality of conflict and confrontation that dominated society could not simply be discarded upon entering the school, as explicated by the principal:

We try to teach the students respect, and not to discriminate. But society moves exactly in the opposite direction. As soon as the students walk out of this building, they find themselves in a completely different environment where distinctions between people are stressed all the time.

Teachers, thus, found themselves in an awkward and frustrating position in which they could neither meet the demands of the national curriculum and school policy in successfully promoting unity and peace, nor fulfil their students' thirst for information and discussion on "politics". A national history curriculum, professional follow-up, and psycho-social support in the wake of the war were dearly missed. To students, in turn, the narrative of unity and peace could not offer a viable explanation for the events they encountered on a daily basis in the media and on the street, especially not when deadly sectarian clashes occasionally brought life in the capital to a standstill and forced educational institutions to close down. Students readily filled the void that was left by teachers' inability or reluctance to address issues that were of central concern to them, drawing upon multiple sources of information at their disposal; sources that greatly varied in accuracy and reliability but would, in the face of a lack of conceivable alternatives, suffice to generate coherent and explanatory perceptions of the past, the present, and the future. As a result, instead of serving as a beacon of unity and peace, this multi-sectarian school essentially became a place where conflict was expressed, shaped, and reinforced, since no capacities were at hand that could direct children's and teachers' interpretations of political processes away from a confrontational mode towards an attitude that could facilitate non-violent discussion, consensus-making, settlement, or the raise of a sense of national unity that would surpass sectarian belonging.

Strikingly, teachers and school administrators all seemed aware of this deadlock and tentatively agreed that silencing discussion instead of channelling and correcting it, was neither a sustainable nor a desirable solution. "We should talk about it," one teacher noted, "but we have to face the reality and live day by day. If we would start a discussion, this would last for hours, days, weeks". "Talking about problems is the ultimate way to reach agreement," the principal added. "At this time, however, talking only results in conflict. It is simply too early to start thinking about that. Divisions are at their max right now. And we don't need another war!"

On the basis of these accounts of students and educators and my own observations in Lebanese schools, we now return to the main quandary raised in the introduction, namely, how to enhance our understanding of the interrelationship between education and violent conflict.

## **Conclusion**

The first point this article makes is that school populations are affected by violent conflict in multiple ways that can only be fully understood when context-specific historical, social, political and cultural elements are taken into consideration. Reports (including UNESCO, 2007) focus on the effects of direct military and political attacks on educational institutions. The present research, however, stresses that the relationship

between conflict and schooling is more multifaceted than a mere one-way process of schools being affected by violence or political pressure. It has been shown how war and sectarian strife act upon the ways in which educators and students perceive themselves and their environments, how they interact socially and politically, how they design cultural forms to make sense of the world around them, and how they embed current events into a narrative that links them with the past, most notably Lebanon's civil war perils and decades-old debates regarding the nation's sovereign or Arab identity.

Taking these context-specific circumstances into account helps us, for example, to understand why teachers and students in this Beirut school defined the impact of intense bombardments, flight, and loss as inflicted by Israeli assaults in 2006 as less disrupting and threatening than the period of internal sectarian friction that ensued the war, although this caused only minor damage and few casualties. Thus, by viewing the relationship between education and conflict as multi-faceted and context-dependent, this research demonstrates how conflict may engender dynamics in schools that are favourable to its continuation, rather than its cessation, notwithstanding peace-affirming curricula and good intentions. Hence, school communities should not exclusively be approached as victims of violent strife, but also as potentially complicit in its active reproduction, reinforcement, and modification.

The second field of enquiry addressed by this study concerns the ways in which teachers engage with conflict-related subjects in relation to their students. As outlined above, educators found themselves caught in between realities of conflict as prevailed outside school and their responsibilities as teachers. This resulted in feelings of powerlessness and frustration in the face of children's obsession with sectarian conflict and the political situation in general. Whereas, Bekerman (2004) outlines how educators explicitly addressed differences in order to bridge them, teachers in this study generally resorted to banning discussions on diversity altogether. In some schools, like the one explored in this paper, an alternative discourse of national unity and respect is being propagated, only to be overruled by messages of confrontation and adversity that sway society. This leads me to conclude that both explicitly addressing diversity, as described by Bekerman, and silencing it or replacing it with an unrealistic picture of peace and unity, risk strengthening education's negative potential rather than ensuring its constructive forces to prevail in a context of conflict.

The third contribution that this paper seeks to make, and one that offers most potential for strengthening education's potentially constructive role in conflict-affected places, relates to children's experiences and perspectives (Leonard, 2007). This research has shown that children do not only reflect on, and learn from, what happens in their social environments, but also actively contribute to the social realities in which they live, by constructing, reinforcing, and redefining narratives and experiences of schooling and conflict. They are not simply innocent or passive victims of adults' misconduct, nor do they consider themselves as such. Conversely, this paper highlights children's calls for information, discussion, and adult guidance in confronting everyday realities they are directly affected by. When this guidance is absent or perceived as unrealistic or insufficient, children turn to their peers in order to establish social and cultural frameworks to cope with, and make sense of, violent conflict. Hence, in the wake of the 2006 war, a sense of national identity was developed that primarily centred on the shared experience of war rather than peace, while the subsequent political tensions resulted in a strong preoccupation with sectarian belonging

and a culture of confrontation among students, which was only superficially pacified inside the school.

While children were undeniably preoccupied with conflict and questions of identity, they seemed, at the same time, willing to and capable of bridging differences and building friendships across political divisions. In line with Leonard (2007), I argue that adults tend to inadvertently obstruct, rather than help, children develop valuable conflict-resolution skills by leaving them no other option than to engage with conflict and identity in ways similar to their own. Before education can have its desired, peace-affirming impact, it is fundamental to carefully listen to, and reflect on, children's perspectives, thus grounding educational interventions in the lived experiences and needs of students. Moreover, it is essential to equip teachers with child oriented, politically neutral skills to guide discussions on sensitive issues, rather than confront them with the task of defining and explaining in class who is right and who is wrong. By fostering and transferring conflict-resolution skills rather than knowledge on conflict, teachers and, through them, students, can make a first step in overcoming differences and extending this approach to other realms of society.

*Note*

1. See for example, the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (<http://un.org/millenniumgoals/education.shtml>) or Save the Children's "Rewrite the Future" campaign ([www.savethechildren.co.uk](http://www.savethechildren.co.uk)).

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